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ABSTRACT

Guided by the cognitive-contextual theory of J. H. Grych and F. D. Fincham (1990), which emphasizes the importance of children's perceptions of conflict as well as conflict characteristics and contextual factors, this study investigated children's appraisals of various types of simulated marital conflict. Seventy Latino children, aged 7 to 12 years, from homes with physically aggressive (n=25) and nonphysically aggressive (n=45) interparental conflict reported affective, cognitive, and behavioral responses to simulated marital conflicts varying in intensity and content (child-related and nonchild-related). Results indicate that children were more likely to blame their parents in response to high-intensity conflicts. Conflict concerning the child was associated with higher levels of negative affect, self-blame, and coping efficacy, while conflict that was nonchild related was associated with more frequent comments regarding parents' negative affect and attributions of parent blame. Children from physically aggressive homes made more predictions of escalation and negative outcome and blamed themselves and their parents more often. These results suggest that children's appraisals of marital conflict are influenced by variations in conflict intensity and content, and that their exposure to conflict in the home may affect their responses to novel marital conflict. (Contains 2 tables and 10 references.) (Author/SLD)

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Latino Children's Affective, Cognitive, and Behavioral Responses to Interparental Conflict

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Abstract

Understanding the effect of interparental conflict on children requires examination of mediating and moderating processes. Guided by Grych and Fincham's (1990) cognitive-contextual theory, which emphasizes the importance of children's perceptions of conflict as well as conflict characteristics and contextual factors, the present study investigated children's appraisals of various types of simulated marital conflict. In this study, 70 Latino children (ages 7 to 12) from homes with physically aggressive (n =25) and nonphysically aggressive (n =45) interparental conflict reported affective, cognitive, and behavioral responses to simulated marital conflicts varying in intensity (high and low) and content (child-related and nonchild-related). Results indicated that children were more likely to blame their parents in response to high-intensity than low-intensity marital conflict. Conflict concerning the child was associated with higher levels of negative affect, self-blame, and coping efficacy while conflict that was nonchild related was associated with more frequent comments regarding parents' negative affect and attributions of parent blame. Children from physically aggressive homes made more predictions of escalation and negative outcome and blamed themselves and their parents more than did children from nonphysically aggressive homes. These results suggest that children's appraisals of marital conflict are influenced by variations in conflict intensity and content and that children's exposure to conflict in the home environment may affect children's responses to novel marital conflict. Implications for the relationship between children's appraisals of conflict and their emotional and behavioral adjustment are considered.

Introduction

Research consistently has shown that exposure to interparental conflict, in both intact and divorced families, is stressful for children, and merits further research attention for the following reasons. First, substantial numbers of children are exposed to conflictual home environments. Second, children's exposure to their parents' marital dissatisfaction, conflict, and violence has been positively associated with child maladjustment. Third, associations have been found between childhood exposure to interparental conflict and the expression of violence in adulthood. Nevertheless, exposure to marital conflict is not necessarily harmful for children. Not all children who witness interparental conflict develop adjustment problems. As such, it is important for researchers to identify the processes through which marital conflict may lead to child maladjustment, as well as the particular aspects of marital conflict which are likely to be harmful for children.

Grych and Fincham's (1990) cognitive-contextual framework suggests that the stressfulness of interparental conflict is mediated by children's perceptions of conflict, which are, in turn, shaped by conflict characteristics, e.g., content and intensity. In order to test this model, we systematically manipulated aspects of simulated marital conflict and examined the effects on children's affective, cognitive, and behavioral responses. Also, in order to test theories that children from different conflict backgrounds have different reactions to marital conflict, groups of children who had and had not ever witnessed physically aggressive interparental conflict were evaluated. Most studies conducted on the effect of interparental conflict on children have sampled Anglo/European-American children from middle class backgrounds. The present study targets an underrepresented group, Latino children from largely low SES backgrounds. According to a national survey, almost one out of four Latino-American families (23.1%) experienced an incident involving physical assault of a spouse during 1985 (Straus & Smith, 1990), indicating probable high rates of child exposure to that conflict.

Methods

Subjects

Participants were 70 Latino children (42 boys, 28 girls) in the 2nd through 6th grades (ages 7 to 12) attending two schools in two predominantly Latino, low SES, Northeastern inner city neighborhoods. All of the children were from two-parent families. Approximately ninety-six percent of the sample was bilingual (Spanish and English speaking) and the remaining children spoke only English.

Measures

Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS; Straus, 1979). The amount of aggressive marital conflict that children witnessed between their parents was assessed with the child version of the CTS. Children were classified into one of two marital conflict groups: physically aggressive (n = 25) or non-physically aggressive (n = 45), depending on whether or not they had witnessed either parent direct any physical aggression toward the other at any time during their parents' marital history.

Marital Conflict Stimuli and Appraisal Measures. In order to evaluate children's thoughts and feelings in response to interparental conflict, the Articulated Thoughts during Simulated Situations (ATSS; Davison et al., 1983) paradigm and the Assessment of Children's Coping Responses to Marital Conflict (O'Brien, Libhaber, & Chin, 1993) were used. For both of these procedures, children were asked to report on their responses to audiotapes of marital conflict. Children were asked to imagine that the audiotaped conflicts were occurring between their own parents. The content and intensity of the conflicts were systematically varied. Two of the marital conflict tapes pertained to child-related themes, while two pertained to nonchild-related themes. For each content scenario, there was a high- and low-intensity conflict version. Each child heard the conflicts in either English or Spanish, depending on the language in which his/her parents argue with each other.

Articulated Thoughts during Simulated Situations. Each of the four taped interactions was divided into three segments. After each of the three segments, there was a

tone followed by a 30 second pause, during which time subjects were directed to tune in to their own thoughts and feelings and report them into a tape recorder. The goal of this procedure was to assess children's spontaneous reactions to marital conflict. A comprehensive coding system (See Table 1) focused on statements children made regarding their affective, cognitive, and behavioral responses to the simulated interparental conflict.

The Assessment of Children's Coping Responses to Marital Conflict. Once children responded to the four conflict vignettes using the above-described spontaneous method, the same four tapes were played once again, but without pauses. After each simulated interaction children completed a structured questionnaire in which they reported their affective, cognitive, and behavioral reactions on Likert scales. See Table 2 for sample items.

Results

Children's responses were examined through a series of repeated-measures analyses of variance (ANOVAs) conducted separately on each of the affective, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions, with conflict intensity (high vs. low) and content (child-related vs. nonchild-related) as within subject factors and child exposure to interparental conflict (physical aggression vs. nonphysical aggression) as a between subject factor.

With regard to conflict characteristics, the study showed that children were more likely to blame their parents, $F(1, 68) = 5.56$, $p < .05$, in response to high-intensity than low-intensity marital conflict. In response to child-related conflict, as opposed to nonchild-related conflict, children reported experiencing more negative affect, $F(1, 68) = 4.12$, $p < .05$, feeling more responsible for the conflict, $F(1, 68) = 4.66$, $p < .05$, and feeling more able to help resolve the conflict, $F(1, 68) = 5.88$, $p < .05$. In response to nonchild-related conflict, compared to child-related conflict, children were more likely to comment on their parents' negative affect, $F(1, 68) = 7.15$, $p < .01$, and blame their parents, $F(1,68)=4.66$, $p < .05$.

With respect to child exposure to interparental aggression, results indicate that children who had witnessed physical aggression between their parents made significantly more predictions of escalation and negative outcome of marital conflict than did children who had not witnessed interparental physical aggression, $F(1, 68) = 4.60$, $p < .05$. Also, children who had witnessed physical aggression between their parents were more likely to blame both themselves, $F(1, 68) = 6.78$, $p < .05$, and their parents, $F(1, 68) = 7.34$, $p < .01$, for the conflict than were children who had not witnessed interparental physical aggression.

Discussion

These findings suggest that variations in the intensity and content of marital conflict, as well as differences in children's prior exposure to marital conflict in their home environment, have a significant effect on children's reactions to novel simulations of marital conflict. High intensity marital conflict, compared with low intensity marital conflict was associated with greater parent blame on the part of children. Perhaps children see parents blaming each other more frequently during high intensity conflict and tend to mimic that style. Children reported higher levels of negative affect, attributions of self blame, and coping efficacy in response to child-related compared to non-child related marital conflict. Conversely, in response to nonchild related marital conflict, compared with child-related, children made more statements regarding their parents' negative affect and were more likely to blame their parents. These different patterns of appraisals associated with child related versus nonchild related marital conflict content may lead to different types of problems for children. For example, children's attributions of self blame and coping efficacy in response to child related marital conflict may contribute to internalizing problems. Learned helplessness theory (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978) suggests that attributing a failure to control a stressor to internal characteristics is likely to diminish self-esteem. When children take personal responsibility for marital conflict, an event which is essentially out of their control, they are likely to feel worse

about themselves. Conversely, children's attributions of parent blame in response to nonchild related conflict may contribute to externalizing problems. A tendency to blame parents for marital conflict may compromise parent-child relationships and may generalize into an "other blaming" stance toward interpersonal conflict which together may contribute to interpersonal aggression.

Children who reported witnessing physical aggression between their parents made more predictions of escalation and negative outcome in response to simulated marital conflict than did children who did not report witnessing interparental physical aggression. The relatively pessimistic reactions to marital conflict offered by children from physically aggressive homes could be based on prior experiences when they witnessed that interparental conflict often escalates and leads to negative outcome. Such past experiences with marital conflict may increase children's negative expectancies toward future interpersonal conflict which may lead to behavioral responses that are overtly hostile and which may serve to escalate conflict.

Also, children from physically aggressive homes endorsed more statements regarding child and parent blame for marital conflict. Research conducted on maritally violent and non-violent couples has found that violent couples criticize and blame their partners more than do non-violent couples (Holtzworth-Munroe, 1988, 1993; Margolin et al., 1988; Vivian & O'Leary, 1987). The current study's findings are consistent with modeling theory, in that children from high conflict homes are exposed to relatively high levels of interpersonal blaming, and thus engage in more blaming of parents and themselves. As described above, blame in response to interparental conflict may lead to maladjustment.

These findings expand our understanding of children's responses to marital conflict. The relatively high percentage of children in the current study who reported witnessing interparental violence (35.7%) attests to the need to study the effects of marital conflict and children's responses to marital conflict on Latino children's adjustment.

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Table 1
Examples of Children's Coded Responses

Coded Dimension	Examples
Affect:	
Child Negative Affect	"I feel sad listening to this"; "I feel confused right now"; "I feel mad."
Others' Negative Affect	"The woman and the man are mad"; "The mother is jealous."
Cognition:	
Primary Processing: Prediction of Escalation/Negative Outcome	"I don't want my parents to keep doing this fighting, cause then maybe one day they'll separate"; "It looked like they were gonna break up and they were gonna get a divorce"; "They could say some bad things to each other and they could get really mad at each other and start fighting."
Primary Processing: Prediction of Child Involvement in Conflict	"They're gonna force the child to take sides."
Secondary Processing: Attributions of Child Blame and Responsibility	"The son shouldn't be like that; I shouldn't behave bad or my father won't take me nowhere."
Secondary Processing: Attributions of Parent Blame and Responsibility	"The mother shouldn't treat the father like that"; "I think the father shouldn't say that."
Secondary Processing: Attributions of Coping Efficacy	This code was never employed.
Behavior:	
Coping Behavior: Intervention	"I'll probably put my father in one room and my mother in the other till they stop (Physical Intervention); "Stop fighting, you two!" (Verbal Intervention).
Coping Behavior: Withdrawal	"I'll go to my room and close the door and watch t.v., so I could forget about that and won't hear them arguing; I just walk away" (This code was employed once.)

Table 2
Sample Items from the Assessment of Children's Coping Responses to Marital Conflict Questionnaire.

Scale	Sample Items
Affect	
Child Negative Affect	
	How sad would you feel?
	How angry would you feel?
Cognition	
Primary Processing: Prediction of Escalation/Negative Outcome	
	How much would you think that your parents would get angrier?
	How much would you wonder whether they might get a divorce?
Primary Processing: Prediction of Child Involvement in Conflict	
	How much would you think that they would get mad at you?
	How much would you think that you would probably have to take sides?
Secondary Processing: Attributions of Child Blame and Responsibility	
	How much would you blame yourself and think the fighting was your fault?
Secondary Processing: Attributions of Parent Blame and Responsibility	
	How much would you blame your mother for the fight?
	How much would you blame your father for the fight?
Secondary Processing: Attributions of Coping Efficacy	
	How much would you think that you could do something to help your parents solve their problem?
	How much would you think that you could do something to help your parents feel better?
Behavior	
Coping Behavior: Intervention	
	How likely is it that you would go into where your parents are fighting and stand in between them to make sure they stopped fighting?
	How likely is it that you would yell at them to stop fighting?
Coping Behavior: Withdrawal	
	How likely is it that you would go somewhere else so you couldn't hear them fighting?
	How likely is it that you would listen to music or watch TV so you couldn't hear them?